

Life Worthy of the Calling

Ephesians 4:1-16

Whenever a Presbyterian Church begins to search for a pastor it has to fill out a Church Information Form, which will be read by prospective applicants. One of the questions it asks is, “What are the key theological issues faced by our church and society?” You have to answer this question in five hundred words or less.

That is a good question. What are the key theological issues faced by our church and by those in the larger community? There are many possibilities. What is our responsibility to the environment? What is our obligation to the poor? What is the role of religion in government? What about personal morality, sexual ethics? The list goes on and on. These are all theological questions that deserve discussion.

But remember, we only have five hundred words to communicate to a potential pastoral candidate what we believe to be the most important, the most fundamental theological question that we all face. When all is said and done, what would we really want a potential candidate to know about the people of First and Calvary?

I think what every one of us wants to know is that God is there and does care. I believe every one of us wants to experience God in deeper and more profound ways. I think we all desire to be part of something that is larger than ourselves. That’s what we want. The key theological question then is how? How do we more deeply experience God and how do we become part of something larger than ourselves? Answer that question and these other issues that receive all the press may be more easily answered.

In the fourth chapter of the letter Paul wrote to the believers in and around Ephesus in what is now present-day Turkey, Paul answers this question of how? His answer is three-fold: remember your calling, recognize your gifts, and relate well to others who seek God as you do.

Paul begins, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you’ve been called.”¹ Now some in this room might be puzzled. “In all my life I’ve never received a call from God like Paul.” Remember, he met the risen Christ while traveling on the road to Damascus. He was going there for the purpose of arresting and persecuting the fledgling Christian Church in that city. In the middle of this journey, Jesus knocked him off his high horse and left him blind, and spoke to him out loud, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me.”² There was no question about who was speaking and what he wanted. This experience was so profound that Saul took on a new name, Paul, because he now considered himself a “new creation.”³ A person could live for years sustained by the memory of a moment like that.

¹ Ephesians 4:1

² Acts 9:4

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17

Not many have such a vision or hear God's voice so loud, but all of us have had a sense of "someone beyond". We've all felt that "there's supposed to be something more" than what we've experienced. You would not be here if that were not so. Whether God spoke to you through whisper, or a Sunday school teacher, or preacher or parent or through a newborn child – God did speak. Somewhere, sometime, you did experience a sense of "someone beyond yourself", and you recognized a desire to be part of "something greater than yourself".

But the memory of that moment may have faded when life didn't turn out the way you thought it would, or when you found yourself in a place you never thought you'd be. You're hanging on, hoping for a feeling like that again, but sometimes you wonder if God was ever there at all. The easiest thing to do in times like these is to second-guess yourself, or worse yet, to second-guess God.

Faith for many fades and falters because life has not met their expectations, and so they conclude God has not come through like they thought he would. Maybe God was never there at all.

When Paul wrote this letter he was held captive in a Roman prison cell. This prevented him from doing exactly that thing he thought God was calling him to do, and that was to proclaim the gospel to the entire world. Almost anyone would have understood if he had begun to question his faith, to wonder if maybe he was mistaken about his mission.

But he doesn't. He continues to proclaim the gospel from a prison cell, and because he is there his words are not shouted into a marketplace, but rather written in a letter. That's why we have his words today. Because he was in a prison cell he had to write these words down rather than speak them face-to-face. In the end he remembered his calling, and he encouraged you to remember yours. Remember those moments when God has spoken to you clearly through a parent or preacher or Sunday school teacher. Remember when you heard God in a silent whisper or a beautiful sonnet. Remember when you saw God in the face of your newborn child or in a crimson sunset. Then lead a life worthy of that call.

To do that, to lead a life worthy of that call, to lead a life of meaning, we must recognize the gifts that God has given. This is important because spiritual disciplines without spiritual power will only leave us discouraged and disappointed. No matter how hard we try to be good, to do the right thing, we will weaken and find ourselves discouraged and disappointed in our own behavior if we do not remember that the gifts, the grace, comes from God.

That is why Paul reminds us that we were "called to one hope that belongs to our call. There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. And grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift."⁴

⁴ Ephesians 4:4-7

In other words, God calls us to something greater than ourselves and to offer the gifts God gives to others. We are to use them for the purpose of building up the body. They are not just for us as individuals so that we might feel more spiritual, but they are for the “work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”⁵ Those people who use the gifts of God for that purpose find that this giving experience does not make them feel empty, but rather more fulfilled. In fact, anyone who has ever been part of a well-functioning team will tell you that the experience of being part of something greater than yourself provides a greater sense of accomplishment than does anything you’ve just done by yourself.

For example, I’ve mentioned before that occasionally during the summer months I am invited by several members of our congregation to be part of their crew in sailing regattas. My qualifications or gift for these sail boat races is that I know how to pull the jib line when the captain yells, “Come about!” Also, I don’t often become seasick and there was also some mention about the need for ballast when the boat is leaning too far from the wind. I evidently have the gift of weight.

Now, sometimes in these races things just don’t happen the way they’re supposed to. The wind dies down, or another boat sneaks across your bow forcing you in a direction you did not wish to go. Or one of the crew just doesn’t quite get it, and pulls when he should release. Everyone is trying, but we’re not quite in sync.

Then there are days, and this is why people sail, when the wind fills the sail, and every member of the crew anticipates and reacts before the captain even speaks, and the boat flies across the waves. There is a sense, a feeling, on days like that, of being part of something greater than you. The crew reacts almost as one person. Win, lose, or draw, there is joy in the day, because it is a gift. I believe it is a gift of God.

That, the Bible says, is the purpose of the Church. We are to receive the wind, the Spirit God gives, and then empowered by God’s Spirit we are to anticipate and react and work together. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, “the whole body is to be joined and knit together, with each part working together.”⁶ When that happens, we draw closer to God, and I believe God draws closer to us.

I believe the church should strive to become a caring community of faith, because I believe that God acts in community. From the beginning of the Bible this has been what God has been about. First, God created a family, and then a nation, a chosen people, and finally Christ created a Church that transcends national boundaries, or ethnic background, or social and economic class.

This is the vision. Let me illustrate how it really works.

⁵ Ephesians 4:12

⁶ Ephesians 4:16

Years ago, I read a column written by Billy Graham's wife, Ruth. She tells of swimming in the sea at an English resort, even though she is a poor swimmer and describes herself as the least enthusiastic of swimmers. On this occasion she was stung by a jellyfish, which resulted in painful cramps and welts on her legs. Also stung at the same time was a sportsman, England's most famous wrestler, called "Big Daddy," three hundred pounds of him, and he was so helplessly stung that his daughter had to pull him out of the water. The next day "Big Daddy" saw Ruth Graham on the beach hesitating to enter the sea again. With genuine compassion and concern, he said to her, "Don't let that jellyfish put you off; you come with me and we'll go back in the water together, today!"

Ruth Graham's take on that? The sea, like life is full of creatures that sting and frighten us. They stunt our spiritual growth so that we may lose heart. But we can find the courage in each other to get our feet wet again and not allow the world to put us down.

The point of the community of faith then is to say to each other, "Come on, we'll go back into the water together, today!"

So, remember your calling, recognize your gifts, and relate to others who seek God as you do.

Let us pray:

Our Father, you have made us what we are and have shown us in Jesus Christ what we can be. Give us the grace to grow according to the gifts Christ has given us. Amen.